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GEOGRAPHIC INTELLIGENCE REPORT

CUBA

PART XV: VEGETATION



CIA/RR GR L-60-1, Part XV

February 1960

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CUBA

PART XV: VEGETATION

I. General

In general the vegetation of Cuba imposes few limitations on cross-country movement, but for the same reasons offers few possibilities for [REDACTED]. With continued cutting for lumber or charcoal and clearing for agriculture, and a reforestation program that is haphazard, [REDACTED] grows less and less. At one time 60 percent of the land area of Cuba was forested. Today only 15 percent is covered by forests or woods.* In this report, Cuba is divided into regions on the basis of seven types of vegetation (see map at the end of this report). The classification of the vegetation was made, not on the basis of the various orders, genera, and species of plants but on the growth characteristics --

[REDACTED] The seven vegetation types are:

1. Savanna, scrub, and cutover land
2. Forest
3. Woods
4. Swamp and marsh
5. Mangrove
6. Xerophytic scrub
7. Marabú

* Users of the recent 1:50,000 map of Cuba are cautioned that the areas verdes (green areas) shown on the map sheets do not necessarily denote forests or even open woods. The density of tree cover in areas verdes varies from that of a true forest to that of undefined areas 20 percent of whose surface is covered with trees at least 10 feet tall.

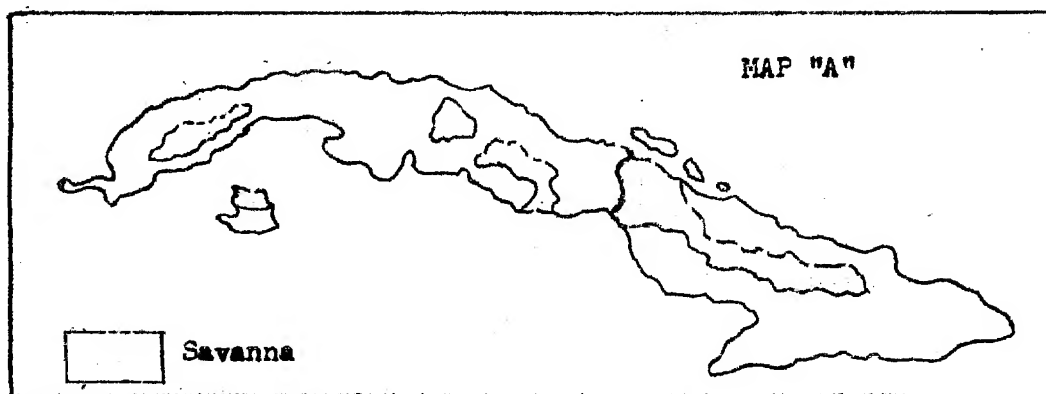
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II. Savanna, Scrub, and Cutover Land

This type of vegetation has by far the widest distribution in Cuba. It corresponds fairly nicely to what the Cubans call "farmland" (terrenos en fincas), which includes about 80 percent of the area of the island. It is estimated that only half of the so-called farmland is agriculturally productive (that is, plow land and pastures) and that the remainder is in savanna and scrub or has some other vegetative cover.

A. Savanna and Scrub

No single category of vegetation covers so much territory in Cuba or is more typical of the Cuban landscape than the savanna. (See Map "A" below.)



In western and central Cuba some of the savanna has been converted to fair crop land and in the eastern part of the country into fair pasture. That which has not been converted is flat-to-rolling non-agricultural land that has a cover of grass and scattered trees and the poverty-stricken appearance associated with areas with poor soil.

Four different types of savannas are easily recognizable by their distinctive vegetation. In western Cuba and on the Isle of Pines the predominant type is the sandy savanna, which supports a growth of guano blanco (Copernicia glabrescens, cabbage palm or palmetto) and the grotesque palma barrigona (Colpothrinax wrightii, pot-bellied palm).*

In the central part of the island are sandy and serpentine savannas where the distinctive vegetation is a combination of palms -- the jata (Copernicia cowelli), the guano hediondo (C. hospita, which might be translated as the stinking palm), and the yarey hembra (C. barleyana).

In eastern Cuba, clay and gravel savannas alternate. These savannas, which are the least fertile and most desolate on the island, are characterized by a combination of yarey hediondo (C. yarey) and yarey de sabana (C. roigii). Both of these palms are stumpy, like the other vegetation of the savanna, and are scrubby rather than tree-like in growth. The celebrated tall and stately palma real (Roystonea regia, royal palm), which is common in Cuba, is called by some Cubans "la Planta Nacional de Cuba." The same epithet is applied by other Cubans to the Seiba (Ceiba pentrada, silk-cotton tree -- a source of kapok). The palma real grows from one end of the island to the other wherever there is fertile soil.

* Pot-bellied is a translation of the Spanish barrigona. It is more delicately and euphemistically referred to by English-speakers as the bottle palm.

An absence of the palma real over an extended area is a certain indication of savanna lands.

Except along open water-courses, where the vegetation is dense, the savannas are easy to traverse [REDACTED] 25X1C

25X1C [REDACTED] They have one distinct advantage, however. In line with the Cuban saying, "On bad land there is good water and on good land the water is bad," the best well and spring water is to be found on the savannas.

B. Cutover Land

Land that was once forested and, to a much smaller extent, savannas form the major part of the plow land in Cuba. Cultivated land amounts to 17 percent of the national area. (In the United States 19 percent of the total area is cultivated.)

Of Cuba's crop land, 52 percent is planted to sugarcane and 8 percent to corn. This means that some 4,600 square miles will be planted with crops [REDACTED] 25X1C

25X1C

25X1C

[REDACTED] 25X1C
[REDACTED] the sugarcane in some fields is left standing through February.

III. Forests

Forests are defined as those wooded areas in which the crowns of the trees touch or overlap. As a result of continued and excessive cutting the forests of Cuba are now limited to the eastern

end of the island and the Sierra Maestra (both of which are mountainous) and the Eastern Zapata Swamp, the western tip of Cuba, and the southern third of the Isle of Pines (all of which are areas of rough, spikey, dog-toothed limestone).

All the forests, whether in the mountains or on the low limestone areas, are difficult to traverse. Off-the-trail movement is possible if one is prepared to use a machete on the undergrowth and on the lianas that stretch from ground to treetop. [REDACTED]

25X1C

25X1C

XV. Woods

Most of the woods in Cuba are remnants of cutover or high-graded forests (high-grading is the practice of felling the biggest and most valuable trees). Woods are defined as "wooded areas in which the crowns or lower branches of the trees do not touch or overlap or areas with small stands of true forests that are fairly widely separated from one another by open land."

Woods in Cuba fall into two broad categories: (1) pinares (pine lands), which are found in the hills of Pinar del Río Province and on the piedmonts of the mountains of Oriente Province and in scattered stands on the northern third of the Isle of Pines; and (2) thin hardwood stands, found on the mountains and hills of Pinar del Río, in the Trinidad Mountains and hills of central Cuba, and

of Oriente Province. Remnants of original stands of woodlands occur in scattered areas.

25X1C

Movement through woods, in most cases, is easy

25X1C

Swamp and Marsh

All Cuban swamps and marshes of any extent are coastal in location. Because swamps are tree-covered, movement along the trails that cross the swamps is only moderately difficult

25X1C

25X1C

Conversely, movement across the treeless marsh is quite difficult even along the pasos (fords), where hip-deep wading may be necessary.

25X1C

The swamps and marshes contain areas of slight elevation, called cayos, that are 3 or more feet higher than the surrounding surface -- the type of hummock which, in the Florida Everglades, is known as a hammock or key. The cayos are usually dry in their highest parts. In marshes they are easily distinguishable because they support trees, and in swamps, because the species of trees differ from those of the surrounding area.

Mangrove

An estimated 6 percent of the area of Cuba is covered by mangrove. It is found primarily along the coasts and, to a much lesser extent,

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in marsh and riverine locations. For most purposes, mangrove may be considered impenetrable.

25X1C

25X1C

25X1C

Because most mangrove has its roots in water, it must usually be approached by small boat. Although each patch of mangrove may be considered impenetrable, the patches are separated or occasionally dissected by streams or tidal channels that lead to dry land.

VII. Xerophytic Scrub

About a third of the total coastal area, or 1 percent of the area of Cuba, is covered with xerophytic (desert) scrub. Although the rainfall of this zone is not deficient (in most areas, it exceeds the average precipitation of places such as Des Moines, Iowa), the xerophytic-scrub areas are true desert as far as the vegetation is concerned because of the high porosity of the soil. Individual plants are either cactus or leathery-leaved scrub and are widely spaced. Movement through this type of desert is fairly easy, but

25X1C

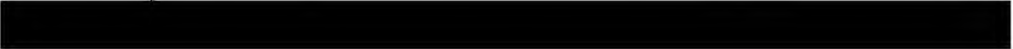
VIII. Marabú

Marabú (Dyckrosthachys nutans) is a bushy thorn tree found in many parts of Cuba. Marabú, an exotic introduced from South Africa, is a biologic pest and is even called a plague by the Cubans because it grows in impenetrable thickets, thus making otherwise arable land

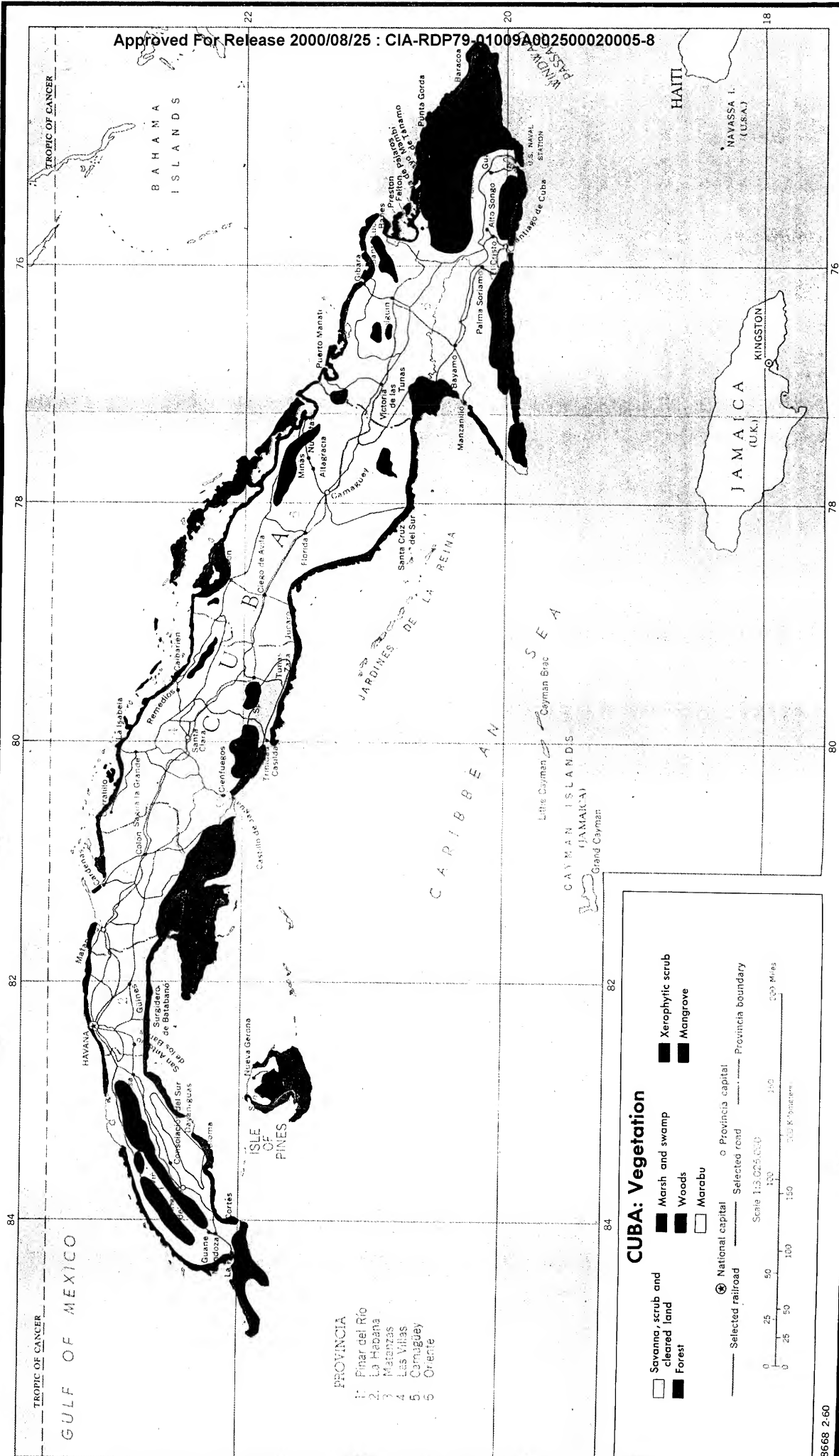
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unusable. Although marabú is found in all parts of the island, the areas indicated on the map are those in which it is the densest. The map, however, is to some extent misleading. In the area shown as marabú in Pinar de Río, for example, only 20 percent of the cultivable land is covered whereas in Santa Clara the coverage is 40 percent or more. Closely similar plants called aroma, or espina del diablo (devil's thorn) and Weyler (named for the last Spanish Governor-General of Cuba, a cruel and sadistic tyrant) are pests of the same order and are included in figures for marabú.

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